

Vermont Teacher Leadership Summit

“Why Teacher Leadership? How Does It Happen?”

June 4, 2007 Capitol Plaza, Montpelier

Learning Intentions:

- Participants will learn promising practices of teacher leadership and supporting conditions from our colleagues here in Vermont.
- The Department of Education will draw on the shared knowledge and expertise of participants to inform challenges, needs, and next steps in supporting teacher leadership in Vermont.

8:00-8:30 Registration and Welcome

8:30-9:00 Keynote Address

Deputy Commissioner Brian O'Regan will help us look at the broad landscape of teacher leadership in Vermont, addressing the questions;

- Why Teacher Leadership?
- How does Teacher Leadership happen?

9:00-12:00 Presentations and Group Discussion

Following Deputy Commissioner O'Regan's talk, we will begin a series of teacher leadership presentations. Presenters will share their experience and insight, also in relation to the key questions. Table groups will respond to questions designed to elicit dialogue related to the two identified learning intentions. Groups will be facilitated by Department staff and participant input will be documented. Proceedings, including existing best practice and recommended support for teacher leadership in Vermont, will be published and disseminated.

Activity Sequence:

Presentation (25 minutes) – Table Dialogue (20 minutes) – Clarifying Questions (10 minutes)

Morning Presentation Teams Include:

- Bonnie Bourne and Team (Mary Hogan, Middlebury)
- Marion Anastasia and Beth Cobb (St. Johnsbury School)
- Bob Pequignot and Team (JFK, Winooski)

Lunch: 12:00-1:00 Lunch

1:00-3:00 Panel Discussion and Questions

- Betsy Knox (Hinesburg Community School)
- Maggie Eaton (U-32 High School)
- Dorothy Finlay (Eden Central, Eden)

3:00-3:30 Next Steps and Closure



Focus Questions for Morning Table Dialogue

- If your table has a clarifying question for the panel, write it on the index card (5 min.).
- Identify and discuss one or more key conditions that need to be present or planned for in a school system that wants to replicate this model of teacher leadership.
- Identify and discuss one or more challenges or needs that might be addressed through the support of the Department of Education or other state level organizations.
- What might be the advantages of incorporating a Teacher Leadership model in your school?

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The term “Teacher Leader” has become a ubiquitous buzz word in education. The image at the heart of teacher leadership, teachers teaching teachers, is intuitively appealing. At the same time, there is no single definition for “Teacher Leader” or single list of conditions that need to be in place to effectively support teacher leadership.

Vermont’s experience with teacher leadership closely mirrors national trends. Many schools in Vermont use teacher leaders in varied roles. In addition, Vermont has a number of professional development programs that provide instruction and support for emerging teacher leaders. We also have some schools and districts that have developed a systemic approach to incorporating teacher leadership into the professional culture of the school.

On June 4, 2007, the Department of Education sponsored a Vermont Teacher Leadership Summit in order to bring some clarity to the fundamental questions, “*Why Teacher Leadership?*” and “*How Does It Happen?*” The Summit provided participants with an opportunity to hear teachers and administrators discuss effective teacher leadership models in Vermont today. It resulted in a clearer understanding of why teacher leadership is important and identified challenges and strategies for support of effective teacher leadership.

The proceedings that follow synthesize participant input, discussion, and reflection in relation to three learning intentions for the day:

- Why Teacher Leadership?
- How Does Teacher Leadership Happen?
- Recommendations For the Future

The hope is that these proceedings and the resources generated by the Summit will serve as a catalyst for on-going dialogue, coordination and communication that will take place in Vermont in support of teacher leadership.

Why Teacher Leadership?

As the introduction suggests, the roles, responsibilities, and structures associated with teacher leadership in schools can vary widely. At the same time, several important themes emerged during the Summit. Both presenter and participant experience confirmed the research that recognizes teacher leadership, not as an end in itself but as an extremely effective vehicle for improving student learning. Another emerging theme was that teacher leadership, in its many forms, is most effective in improving student learning when teachers are empowered to serve as resources for one another and the school system as a whole. Finally, there was a clear acknowledgement that teacher leadership and its ability to improve student learning thrive in school cultures that support and depend on communities of practice. Leadership requires not just empowerment but also accountability. The shared responsibility and accountability inherent in communities of practice foster the culture that it's not "my class" or "her class," it's "they're all our students".

The following are comments from participants that reflect a broader consensus regarding the advantages of teacher leadership.

Teacher Empowerment

"Teachers talking to teachers validates the fact that we are the experts."

"Teacher Leadership taps into expertise of teachers and values that expertise."

"Teachers feel they can affect change because they are given the responsibility with the appropriate support."

Communities of Practice

"Helps diminish isolation."

"Brings together new and veteran teachers – new perspectives and all learn."

"It's everybody...it's not that there are individual teachers who have the information; it's empowering across the board."

"They have established a climate where data teams can feel that their conversations are open and safe. There is a clear focus on PD for how to look at data, as well as professional learning communities where teachers come prepared to discuss the student work."

"There is a common language. All kids hear the same vocabulary."

Improved Student Learning

“There is a pervasiveness of Responsive Classroom culture among the teachers as well as between teachers and students.” “Teachers improve practice by examining practice.”

How does Teacher Leadership Happen?

Through presentation and discussion, participants at the Summit identified both the characteristics of a successful teacher leadership model (shared responsibility and a clear focus based on data) and the conditions necessary to support a successful model (trust, time, and systemic support).

Characteristics of a Successful Model:

Shared Responsibility

To sustain a successful model over time, expertise is developed and shared within a culture of mutual support. Teachers’ strengths are recognized and used effectively. There is an expectation that all teachers will engage in a leadership role at some level and that this shared responsibility supports everyone.

Clear Focus based on Data

In schools where priorities have been determined and initiatives are focused, teacher leadership emerges through conversations about how to improve instruction. In this model, the challenge is not to identify teacher leaders but to empower teachers through a community of practice. Empowered as professionals who can make a difference for their colleagues and all students, teachers will identify themselves as leaders. Conversations around instruction and the decisions that are made are based on the analysis of student achievement data and other sources of data that reflect student needs. As teachers use data to improve instruction and student learning, a feedback loop develops linking clear focus, teacher empowerment/leadership, and improved student learning.

Supporting Conditions of a Successful Model:

Trust

Schools that exhibit the characteristics of a successful teacher leadership model foster a culture of safety supported by the elements of confidence and trust. Along with the empowerment and accountability that comes with teacher leadership, there is also an understanding that the community of practice works in a safe environment where teachers can be honest with themselves and each other. Teacher leaders function in their role, not as “know-it-all” or the “chosen ones” but as collaborators who share their experience and ideas and in return, benefit from the experience and ideas of others. A culture of safety strengthens over time as teams work together, supported by tools such as the Critical Friends Protocol.

Time

Finding time for teachers to collaborate is a challenge in any school. Schools with a successful teacher leadership model intentionally plan for teacher collaboration time. Structural time is built into the schedule when teachers can engage in embedded professional development and data based decision making. Because common time is valued so highly, leadership at all levels works to ensure that this time is supported, focused, and productive.

Systemic Support

Continuity is a critical condition that is present in sustained models of teacher leadership. There is support from principals, superintendents and school boards; teachers are involved in leadership activities at three distinct levels: classroom, building, and supervisory union. When change does occur, continuity is preserved. There is a clear “big picture” so that all members of the system know the purpose of new initiatives and how they fit in with established practices. As administrative and teaching staff change, new administrators and teachers understand the teacher leadership model and receive support in becoming a part of the culture that supports the model.

The following are comments from participants that reflect a broader consensus regarding successful models of teacher leadership.

Characteristics of a Successful Model:

“It (teacher leadership) began because of a recognition on the part of the leaders that it was an essential component of a well run school. There were individuals who wanted to take on the role and they had a vision of how it would work in the school. The leadership in place also recognized the benefit of making this vision a reality.”

“We have expectations that it is the responsibility of EVERYONE to assume a leadership position in some way.”

“Teacher leadership should not be the ‘frosting,’ it should be an embedded part of the fabric of the school; time is not enough; if the system and structure are not in place to support the work of teachers, the creation of more time will not lead to effective change. Time needs to be carved out with a purpose in order to truly institutionalize teacher leadership.”

Supporting Conditions of a Successful Model:

“Changes in scheduling are necessary but may take “baby steps” in order to get the ideal scheduling.

Creating blocks of time that are consistent for teachers and students would be a way to do this but will take prior planning. Set goals and what you aim to achieve in advance of scheduling.”

“Administrators don’t have enough time to engage in the broad range of instructional leadership activities. There were teachers who wanted to take on a leadership role and a willingness on the part of administrators to allow teachers to take on this role.”

“Teachers reflect on their teaching and do so as a group. Formal criteria for the meeting were developed, and we stuck to them. We didn’t let the focus be taken over by IEP discussions, etc.”

Recommendations

There was a clear appreciation among participants for the opportunity to come together and examine the efficacy of improving student learning through teacher leadership. The Department of Education was both applauded for making this opportunity available in the state and challenged to provide strong vision and leadership that will foster sustained support and coordination of resources for teacher leadership.

Some of the priority areas that were identified for regional or statewide support include:

- Easily accessible information and models that provide effective systemic approaches to teacher leadership.
- Professional development for teachers in the skills of teacher leadership.
- Professional development for teachers and administrators that will enable them to establish professional learning communities and data based decision making processes in schools.
- Networks for teacher leaders to share ideas and experience.

Several questions for further study were raised. Have educators in Vermont identified an effective growth path for professional development that supports teacher leadership? What are the structures and supports for effective teacher led data teams? And finally, have schools or districts developed an effective strategy for selecting the content and sequence of implementation of initiatives to support teacher leadership?

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Summit Presenters:

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